

Tyagaraja's Views on Society

By Mahesh Iyer

Tyâgarâja (1767 to 1847) was one of the greatest composers of Carnatic music. He along with Muthuswami Dikshitar and Syama Sastri form the legendary trinity of Carnatic Music. Tyagaraja was a prolific composer par excellence. His compositions are highly regarded all over the world by connoisseurs of Carnatic music. Tyagaraja compositions focus primarily on devotion towards his Ista Devata -- Sri Rama. However he had often composed on another important aspect, which is the central theme of this article – the South Indian Society of 17th and 18th century.

Tyagaraja's views on society can be summarized as follows: Society is intolerably materialistic; they don't understand the ephemeral nature of material wealth and waste their time pursuing transient pleasures; they don't seem to understand that simply submitting oneself completely to Lord Rama is the only resort to be saved of repeated birth and death; the society is rendered powerless when it comes to re-channeling their mind into divinity; they are constantly in pursuit of riches and this is synonymous with being unholy.

In reviewing Tyagaraja's compositions, the vast majority of them portray enormous evidence that he adopted the Bhakti marga, with Rama as his Ishta Devata. It is also certainly noteworthy that he has composed on other deities as well. "Lalithy" in Bhairavi, "Ganamoorthey" in Ganamoorthy, "Siva Siva" in Panthavarali are all famous examples. There are several compositions that convey a "please protect me; I've no other way" theme; refer "Enduko Ni Manasu" (Kalyani). Numerous other compositions also convey a sense of guilt, of possibly not having lived upto Rama's expectations. There are others with "ninda stuthi"; refer "Mariyada gadura" (Sankarabharanam). There is also evidence of epiphany -- deep realization. In "Paramatmudu" (Vagadeeswari) for instance, he conveys the one and only one truth that pervades all beings (living and non-living). Tyagaraja appears to have experienced this elevated state of mind. Another philosophical treatise is "Manasu Swadhinamaina" in Sankarabharanam. Such compositions are remarkably different from the hundreds of others that generally follow a bhakti marga theme. Largely, Tyagaraja's sahitya are expressions from the heart. There may not be a logical substantiation of these feelings that are explainable by others close to him. For instance, there are kritis that deal with Tyagaraja's family issues etc... As is common, geniuses may be hard to understand.

In terms of societal frustration levels, I find remarkable similarities between Adi Sankaracharya and Tyagaraja. Specific case in point, "Bhaja Govindam ... Govindam bhaja Moodamathe" by Sankaracharya and "Theliyaleru Rama" by Tyagaraja. Sankara re-interpreted the vedic sacrifices to mean something else; refer his bhashyams. Tyagaraja also lashes out on vedic sacrifices in "Yagnadulu" (Jayamanohari), "Ninne Nera Nammi" (Panthavarali) and "Manavyala kinchara" (Nalinakanti). If you go back in time line you would also find other similar "anti-establishment" proponents like Jesus (versus the Roman

high priest), Mohammad Nabi (versus the merchants of Mecca), Buddha vs Hindu priests, Guru Gobind Singh vs Hindu priests etc...

Back during Tyagaraja's time, the communication media certainly did not have as profound an effect as today. Due to this, what happened in one part of the world largely went unnoticed by the rest. Today, that's not the case. We do find that the societal problems for entire world show remarkable consistency in their attributes like being materialistic, hypocritical, lustful, etc, which were the concerns expressed by Tyagaraja.

Analyzing Tyagaraja's views on society, there are some issues that I confronted based on a sample of roughly 100 kritis from TKG's book:

1) One goal; several paths:

Expecting an entire society to follow one's view point is contrary to the prescriptions of other great societal philosophical treatises that command critical mass followings. In "Dandame Bettenura" (Balahamsa) Tyagaraja laments that "people in this town/street are not of homogenous disposition". In "Manasu Vishaya" (Nattakurinji) he laments, "how can people be so silly". Bhagawat Gita prescribes Gnyana yoga, Kriya yoga and Karma yoga in addition to Bhakti yoga as various paths of self-realization. There are also various philosophical schools of thoughts around the world prescribed by other religions that advocate even more diverse approaches. Personally I would not argue on the relative superiority of one versus the other, but I'd certainly point out that the societal norms are very diverse. So, simply because the entire society does not follow Bhakti marga with Rama as the Ishta Devata, it may not mean abrogation of the societal norms. Nor does it mean that things are getting progressively bad. In other words, societal conformance in forms of devotion may not be a measure of societal progress.

2) Monotheistic versus Polytheistic:

In reviewing "Sukhi Yevvaro" (Kanada), "Evvarani" (Devamruthavarshini), "Nalina Lochana" (Madhyamavathy), "Sri Rama Dasa Dasoham" (Dhanyasi) etc., it appears that that Tyagaraja is conveying that the pinnacle of godliness is no deity other than Rama. At that time the society was probably predominantly polytheistic. For instance, Dikshitar introduces the Advaita thought seamlessly into his songs, resolving the inherent relationship between Advaita philosophy and polytheistic worship. Syama Shastri, Purandara Dasa, Oothakkadu, Swathi Thirunal, Gopalakrishna Bharathi, Annamacharya and numerous other great composers have all adopted their own Ista Devata; not Rama. Today, I see a re-interpretation of Hindu scriptures to convince that the true teachings are monotheistic; not polytheistic. While recent scholarly reviews of reprehensible societal conduct almost always prescribes an adherence to a certain school of faith as a means for resolution, there is no established relative superiority or inferiority among the deities.

3) Internal versus External resolution:

Scientific and philosophical interpretation of ancient scriptures suggest that the resolution for personal and societal problems cannot be solved by something external like an “Ista Devata” but it needs to be fixed internally with introspection and meditation. The omnipotent, formless power that pervades everything in this universe is identical for all beings (living and non-living). Seeking that godliness within oneself is the definitive approach versus other alternatives. Tyagaraja himself, admits that even with all the knowledge that one has, if the person is devoid of mental tranquility, calm and poise, peace would elude him; refer “Santamuleka” (Sama).

4) Utopian:

Possibly envisages an ideal world – maybe Utopian. There are numerous examples of how societal movements that seek to establish the Utopian concepts have struggled to succeed or be even accepted as practical. More recent philosophers like Swami Vivekananda sought a more inclusive approach that certainly appear to have understood the limitations of a very strict path leading to the ultimate realization of truth, with his famous “sisters and brothers of America” speech. Gandhi too adopted an approach that appears to be less prescriptive that includes diverse faiths with his famous “Iswar/Allah Sab ko sanmathi de bhagawan” poem. Jogging back on time about 2000 years, Buddha, argued that Hindu philosophy was simply inadequate for societal problems of his time and went on to establish his own religion – Buddhism. There are hundreds of other examples... But, overall, there appears to be sufficient evidence that there were numerous realized souls, including Tyagaraja, that sought to establish an egalitarian society but the ones that appear to have gained acceptance, have one thing in common --- being inclusive, not exclusive; in other words, being non-Utopian.

5) Use of force:

Kritis such as “Edi ni Bahubalaparakrama” (Darbar), “Bagayenayya” (Chandrajyothi) appear to provide a tacit approval for the use of force. All the wars around the world so far did not produce a lasting peace; nor has it rid the world of non-righteous people; nor has it made societies less materialistic... So, I wonder if this is indeed applicable today.

In conclusion, I feel that the 17th and 18th century societal obsession with materialism, as characterized by Tyagaraja, is very much similar to what we have today in the 21st century. In fact this is prevalent all over the world, not simply in the southern part of India. However, the recourse to this situation is a multi-faceted path; not one-size-fits-all.